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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000313

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [MY](#)  
SUBJECT: CARTOON CONTROVERSY ENVELOPS MALAYSIA'S PREMIER  
ENGLISH DAILY

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 232 (NOTAL)  
[1](#)B. KUALA LUMPUR 267 (NOTAL)

Classified By: PolCouns Thomas F. Daughton for reasons 1.4 b, d.

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: A new cartoon controversy erupted in Malaysia on February 20 when the country's second-largest English-language newspaper, the New Straits Times (NST), published a syndicated cartoon poking fun at the global Prophet Muhammad cartoon controversy. Muslim NGOs and the Islamic opposition party immediately lodged police complaints against the newspaper, claiming that the cartoon insulted Islam. The NST responded by prominently reprinting the cartoon above an editorial that accused its detractors of engaging in personal vendettas and seeking political gain. The internal security ministry then summoned the newspaper's chief executive officer and editor-in-chief for an "interview," and demanded a written explanation for the NST's actions. Prime Minister Abdullah's decision concerning possible punishment of the NST is expected shortly. Observers suggest the controversy is being fueled by the ambitions of the new minister of information. As the NST is owned by the prime minister's own political party (UMNO), eventual punishment seems likely to be confined to the newspaper's senior editors. End Summary.

My Funny Cartoon is Your Offensive Caricature  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) On February 20 the NST published a syndicated "Non-Sequitur" cartoon from the U.S. depicting a caricaturist doing a sketch while waiting for customers. A sign next to him reads, "Caricatures of Muhammad While You Wait!" The cartoon's caption reads, "Kevin finally achieves his goal to be the most feared man in the world..." The day after the cartoon's publication, three Muslim NGOs and the Islamic opposition party, PAS, lodged police reports against the NST, alleging that the cartoon was insulting to Islam. PAS Youth Chief Salahuddin Ayub, who filed his party's complaint, told the media, "The act of publishing the cartoon could threaten national security, as it is defamatory and can weaken national unity." PAS and the NGOs collectively demanded that unspecified "action" be taken against the newspaper and its editorial staff.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The latest cartoon controversy follows recent GOM punishment of two newspapers that printed "offensive" caricatures of Muhammad. On February 9, after the Sarawak Tribune printed one of the now-infamous Danish cartoons, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi used the Printing Presses and Publications Act to suspend the paper's publication license and operations indefinitely (ref A). The PM, who is also internal security minister, declared any future publication of the Danish cartoons to be illegal. The GOM then suspended publication of the Chinese-language Guang Ming Daily for two weeks starting February 16 after it published a photo of a

man reading a newspaper in which the Danish cartoons were published.

#### The NST Counterattacks...

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¶4. (C) Unlike the cartoons published in the Sarawak Tribune and the Guang Ming Daily, the NST's cartoon contained no image of Muhammad. And while the two punished newspapers printed front-page apologies in response to initial police reports lodged against them, the NST promptly counterattacked in its February 22 edition. The newspaper reprinted the offending cartoon on page 3 and, in an editorial appearing directly under it, accused the NGOs, PAS and unnamed "powerful" individuals of engaging in personal vendettas and seeking political gains. The editorial implied that the NST's editors were being targeted for retribution in response to the NST's "truthful" reporting. The editorial concluded with the NST's rationale for its strong public response to the police reports: "What are we saying of our own selves and our country if we allow people with personal motives to capitalize on religious and racial sensitivities to victimize others?"

¶5. (C) The NST's senior foreign news editor, K.P. Waran, told poloff that the controversy would have likely been defused by the prime minister had Abdullah not been traveling abroad when it flared up. Waran claimed the PM had seen the cartoon and found nothing offensive in it. He said the NST's editorial staff believed that newly appointed Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin (ref B) wanted to act as "supereditor" of all major newspapers in the country. He further speculated that Zainuddin "wants to replace the NST's senior editors with his own people, and will use the cartoon

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controversy as the pretext" for such action. Waran noted that the cartoon was not reviewed by the subeditor in charge of the newspaper's multiple-page comics section, where it initially appeared in the normal daily section allocated to syndicated cartoons. He believed the editors would have stopped its publication had they noticed the cartoon's content in advance, but the editor-in-chief chose nonetheless to reprint the cartoon to defend the NST from "uncalled-for criticisms."

#### And the Government Responds In Kind

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¶6. (C) On February 22, the internal security ministry summoned the NST's CEO and editor-in-chief for questioning. They were interviewed by the ministry's secretary general and presented with a "show-cause" letter demanding an explanation of their actions in printing (and reprinting) the cartoon. The letter allows the NST three days to prepare its reply. The dispute has been prominently covered by the media here, including on the NST's entire front page February 23.

¶7. (C) Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin told the media February 22 that the cabinet had discussed the NST cartoon issue during its regular meeting that day. Following that meeting he said, "The action of NST to re-publish a cartoon deemed to belittle the Holy Prophet is not wise and an uncalled-for provocation." Zainuddin admitted the cartoon could be interpreted in a number of different ways, but asserted that "not everyone could look at it intellectually." According to press reports about the closed cabinet meeting, Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar joined Zainuddin in condemning the NST's actions and called for punitive action. Other ministers, including Law Minister Nazri Aziz and Works Minister Samy Vellu, reportedly desired no government response. Prime Minister Abdullah is expected to announce his decision concerning punishment of the NST and its editors soon after the GOM receives the editors, written explanations for their actions.

18. (C) COMMENT: Zainuddin showed more than a little daring in manipulating the cartoon controversy to his advantage while the prime minister was out of the country. The new information minister was nonetheless careful to tell the media that a final decision would not be made until Abdullah returned. While Zainuddin has put the PM in a sticky position, the notoriously non-confrontational Abdullah seems unlikely to fire him after less than a week in office. If the GOM takes action against the NST, it will probably be a matter of replacing senior staff rather than suspending the paper's publishing license. The New Straits Times is, after all, Malaysia's oldest newspaper and one of the oldest English-language dailies in Southeast Asia, an establishment standard long owned by the country's main political party. Whatever the outcome, the assertion of power by the new information minister does not bode well for press freedom in Malaysia, particularly for the limited number of outlets not controlled by the parties of the ruling coalition.  
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